

A YEAR AT MALCOLM X: Second Chance at Success Single mom defies odds, just by getting involved

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On paper, Tammy Matthews' children should be failing.

Matthews, 30, grew up in the projects of San Francisco's rough Hunters Point neighborhood, where her mom and her mom's mom grew up, too. She did horribly in school, got pregnant when she was 17, and barely eked out her high school diploma. She later had a second child, by another man who's now in prison, and the three live on welfare and disability checks.

Those are the grim facts, but Matthews -- and perhaps more importantly, her children -- refuse to be kept down by them.

Matthews' first child, Chegraftanay (a combination of three relatives' names) Mims, is earning a 4.0 in middle school and once told her principal, "My mother has a plan for me -- I'm going to be a genius, so I have to work hard."

Matthews' second child, Franklin Irvin Jr., is in third grade at Malcolm X Academy, an elementary school on the hill in Hunters Point. An avid reader, he especially likes geography books, checking out volumes on the 50 states from his school library one by one. He and his sister have never traveled farther than Sacramento, but Franklin likes reading about faraway places. "I want to learn what they're special for," he explained.

So how has Matthews done it? Mainly, she's just there.

Making sure her kids get to school on time every morning. In her kids' classrooms, getting to know their teachers. At the door when they come home, asking whether they have homework and insisting they get to it right away. At their schools' family events, learning what she needs to do to ensure her children's success.

"My kids' education is the most important thing to me," she said. "I'm always there to make sure things are done right -- whatever they're a part of, I'm a part of."

The family, in fact, is the perfect example of what studies say: that while parents' income and education level do influence their children's academic success, parental involvement matters even more.

According to research compiled by the San Diego County Office of Education, "the most accurate predictor of a student's achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which the student's family is able to create a home environment that encourages learning."

Deena Zacharin, director of the San Francisco Unified School District's parent relations office, agrees. "Imparting high expectations for your child doesn't take a high socioeconomic status or a lot of education," she said. "It's just telling your child you know they can succeed."

At Malcolm X Academy -- which saw an improvement in test scores this fall after nearly being shut last spring, at least in part due to poor academic performance -- getting parents involved in their children's

education isn't always easy, especially with parents who once struggled academically themselves and now endure crushing poverty.

According to state statistics, 35 percent of Malcolm X parents didn't finish high school. Forty-five percent earned their high school diploma but went no further. Seventeen percent had some college, 2 percent are college graduates, and just 1 percent attended graduate school. Seventy-seven percent of students at the school are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Christy Yom, a second-grade teacher at Malcolm X, said it often becomes clear why a child is failing once she talks to the parents. Sometimes the children aren't being served breakfast, aren't sleeping well because of turmoil in the home, aren't read to and aren't instructed to do their homework, she said.

"That's what's sad -- kids don't choose who their parents are going to be," Yom said. "It breaks my heart when I see a lot of potential, yet there's something in the home that's unstable."

Yet Yom sees the happy flipside to this equation too, like when she taught Franklin, 8, last year, and Chegraftanay, 12, a few years ago. She estimates parental involvement lifts children at least 75 percent of the way to academic success.

"Teachers play a huge role, but it starts from home. It's the root of their success," she said. "If the kid stands out and I get to talk to the parents, I realize why. Very rarely are kids driven on their own and just born like that."

Yom said Chegraftanay always finished her assignments early and asked for more work. Yom taught her the Korean alphabet and some words in the language.

"It made me want to push her and really allow her to soar because she wanted to fly," Yom said.

She and other teachers at the school said Matthews stands out for her devotion to her children and her involvement in their education. When she didn't understand Chegraftanay's math homework in fifth grade, she asked her daughter's teacher, James Lowe, for tutoring in it herself.

It's a far different attitude than when Matthews was a girl. She started running away from home when she was 12, sometimes for a week; she said it was just an act of rebellion. She'd ride Muni buses all night long when she didn't have somewhere to stay. She cut class, rarely did her homework, and said her best grade-point average ever was a 2.0.

Matthews can't really pinpoint how she made the shift from not caring about school as a student to caring desperately about it as a mother.

"I don't have any secrets as far as, 'Well, I do this instead of this,' " she said. "I just tell them how important education is. I'd hate for them to wind up like their mom -- my daughter pregnant as a teenager or my son on the streets becoming a statistic."

But delve deeper, and it's clear Matthews is doing much more. She read to them when they were little, and the children's rooms are dotted with library books.

Franklin said he remembers completing Dr. Seuss' "Hop on Pop" all on his own when he was in first grade.

"That was the first book I ever read," he said. Asked how he felt after finishing it, he said, "Fine. Well, great a little."

The first rule of the household is that homework must be done first thing, before TV or video games. "It's the first question that comes out of her mouth when we walk in the door," said Chegraftanay. "Do you have homework?"

Matthews used to work as a saleswoman at Old Navy but is now on disability because of lymphedema in her right leg, a condition that causes painful swelling but is not life-threatening. She tried taking classes at City College recently, but was overwhelmed and stopped going. ("I sometimes wish I could go back in time and complete college like I should have done right out of high school," she said, adding she might give it another try.)

Despite their difficult circumstances, Matthews tries to instill pride in her children, telling them what her grandmother told her: "It's not where you live, it's how you live."

"My kids know we live in the projects, but when they walk inside of our home, it's a totally different feeling -- they're very comfortable," she said.

On a recent morning, Chegraftanay and Franklin sat in the living room of their pleasant, three-bedroom home in the housing projects of the Western Addition, eating Frosted Flakes and watching "The Next Karate Kid," starring a young Hilary Swank.

Soon, Chegraftanay would board a bus to Aim High Academy in the Haight and Matthews would drive Franklin to Malcolm X. (Though the family moved out of Hunters Point a couple of years ago, Matthews loves Franklin's elementary school and didn't want to transfer him.)

But first, as with most sisters and brothers, there was some good-natured ribbing.

Reminded of telling her elementary school principal she was going to be a genius and asked whether she was one yet, Chegraftanay replied, "I am -- yes."

"No," shot back Franklin. "You don't know college stuff or high school stuff."

"I will," Chegraftanay said.

She wants to go to Stanford or Harvard. Why? "I've heard a lot of good things."

Matthews says her daughter is going to college "without a doubt." Chegraftanay said she wants to be a hip-hop singer, a writer and an entrepreneur. Yom, her former teacher, envisions her as a lawyer, a teacher or a doctor.

Matthews has even loftier goals for her.

"If she keeps it up, she'll have the option to be anything she wants to be," she said, sounding like any proud mom. "We're bucking for president of the United States."

But first, it was time for seventh grade, and after a kiss for her mom, Chegraftanay was off.

The series

After nearly being closed for poor performance, Malcolm X Academy in San Francisco's Hunters Point neighborhood has been given another chance to prove it can do the job. Today's article is one in a series as The Chronicle tracks the school's progress during the 2005-06 school year.

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